

*“Grammars of Creation”*: An interview with Brian Castro  
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**Abstract:** This interview with contemporary Australian writer Brian Castro addresses a number of themes and concepts that are central to his critical work and fiction. In the interview, Castro discusses his oeuvre as a whole, providing insights into the starting point for his first eight novels. He comments on the concepts of transgression, hybridity, *polyphonia*, cosmopolitanism and play, underlining the central significance of grammar, ethics and aesthetics in his work. The interview also includes reflections on the development of Asian Australian studies and the importance of translating novels. In the final sections of the interview, Castro discusses the relation between his critical work and his novels and reflects on the common conflation of the novelist and the theorist in much literary criticism.

**Keywords:** Australian Literature, Literary Theory, Aesthetics

**I wanted to start with a question about your work as a whole. Your first eight novels deal with a variety of themes, locations and plots. Do you feel that they are part of a continuity, or do you find that some of your novels stand out from others?**

I am more a stylist than a person who's concentrating on specific subjects – obviously there are subjects that I deal with like Asian settings, hybrid characters, trans-culturation etc. But those are not so much themes in my mind as the styles I fall into in terms of writing, so that the novels actually form a kind of wave, like a sine curve. They go in a very literary manner then they fall back into a rather plain style, and then they go up in a literary manner and fall back into a spare style – they usually alternate like that. So that if you look at *Drift* for example, it's an extremely literary book, and then *Stepper* becomes a thriller, more or less, without too many literary references.

So I suppose that I work in terms of style more than in terms of subject matter, and Flaubert was an early influence. According to Sartre, in Flaubert's work, style translates thought. But subject matter is always there in terms of the “hybrid” character in Australia. I don't think it has been dealt much with. I suppose that was the case in *The Garden Book*. The other novels all have rather indeterminate characters; sometimes they are completely European like in *Double-Wolf*.

**When you say that some of your works are more literary and that others are perhaps more focused on plot, where would you situate *Pomeroy* and *Double-Wolf*?**

They were both written one after another, more or less. I saw *Pomeroy* as a kind of parody of the postmodern detective or investigative journalist fiction and it was bit of a failure really. And then *Double-Wolf* came hard on the heels of that – I thought, I want to now do something seriously. I saw the Wolf-Man, Freud's patient, as a perfect opportunity to speak about family in a distanced kind of way, whereas *Pomeroy* was a little bit too close to the journalism side of the family and I was wary about using some of that material. In *Double-Wolf*, I could use somebody else's life as a template and work through that, investigating fascist fathers and oedipal sons. I didn't want to take that too far, so in *Double-Wolf* I more or less had to split the narration just like in *Birds of Passage*. I like that sort of split narrative because you can jump in and out of, for want of a better word, subjectivity.

**In a 2008 conference in Wollongong, Bernadette Brennan described *Shanghai Dancing* as the novel that you had been working towards for the last twenty years, identifying elements in your previous novels that would have led to *Shanghai Dancing*. Do you see *Shanghai Dancing* in this light?**

I must admit that at the time I didn't see it that way. I'd dealt with some of those themes before, but in *Shanghai Dancing* I think it was more the fact – this may have surprised people – that it moved further away from autobiography than ever before. Because there were vastly exaggerated chapters and episodes and they moved through time – from the sixteenth century right through to the present – in one sense *Shanghai Dancing* was one big epic. I wanted to test the *longue durée*. I wanted to use the full range of the piano, from the lowest key to the highest key. The book – you have probably noticed – starts with the letter A, and the last chapter starts with the letter Z, so it actually works through the whole notion of the dictionary as well. I was not just playing this time but *stretching* to see what I can do with writing in this form, using my own familial stories and exploding them into complete fictions. I thought that by doing that I didn't need to change the name. Castro was the name that was being used, but it didn't refer to me. So many people think it's a straight autobiography but it isn't. As I've explained many times, the name Castro is so familiar in Spain and Portugal that it is like Smith.

***The Garden Book* has also been seen as the culmination of your style and it contains themes that you have explored in previous novels. Do you see it in the same way? How do you find that it relates to *Shanghai Dancing*?**

*The Garden Book* came out of a totally different position because I had read of a seventeenth-century Chinese woman who was badly treated by her husband while living on a farm. The outstanding thing about her was that she wrote poetry, and without any resources, the only things she could write on were leaves. I thought that this was a good story to run with. *The Garden Book* is probably one of the few books where I had actually taken a story – well not a story but a documentary from elsewhere – and then decided that I'd really like to explore it. So I set it in the 1930s in Australia, in the same kind of fashion, with a very dominating, cruel husband, and then a lover comes along; he is much more conscious and aware, a bit of a scholar, and of course she's attracted to him. She can't leave her familial place because that's where her inspiration comes from,

so if she took off with Jasper to the United States, her poetry would be finished. In one sense, I suppose *The Garden Book* refers to the Garden of Eden. It's potent with all kinds of things, risk as well as opportunities.

### **Australia as the Garden of Eden – in the Dandenongs?**

In the Dandenongs. Although it comes with all its faults.

**This is an interesting way of approaching writing – writing being linked to culture and the impossibility to write outside of a particular country or setting. Does this come from your personal experience or is this something that featured in the story of Swan Hay?**

It comes from personal experience. Because I come from a confluence of cultures and I've lived in different places, I can really only call Hong Kong, Macau and Australia as my homes. Whereas if I lived in France for a couple of years, I wouldn't feel justified to write from that particular culture, even though I can observe it from the outside. So I have always used the alternation between Australia and Asia as my home grounds to draw inspiration from. I am equally at home writing about Australia when I'm living in Hong Kong, equally at home in Australia writing about Hong Kong, Macau and other places in Asia. I feel that I own a little bit of those cultural moments, whereas I don't see them in other places.

***Birds of Passage* deals with the migrant experience and with Asian Australian themes. Your last two novels, *Shanghai Dancing* and in particular *The Garden Book*, deal with similar themes, yet there seems to be a lapse in the attention brought to these themes between *Birds of Passage* and *Shanghai Dancing*. I was wondering if you saw your last two novels as a return to previous concerns about autobiography and the Asian Australian community.**

Not so much a return but through an increasing maturity as a writer, I think. I just found that *Shanghai Dancing* was the pivotal point of what I had to say. I was tired of the same old form of the 19th Century novel. I certainly stopped fooling around and I decided that this was the big work. I had reached the stage of being able to write it because it coincided with many things: both my parents had died and therefore I felt free to pursue certain things without feeling guilty or disloyal. Maybe there are autobiographical elements in *Shanghai Dancing*, but you know autobiographical elements can exist inside a small sentence and then jump out of it, so within this sentence an element can be autobiographical or it may not be, it may be completely fictional. There are things, nuances that only I would know – what is real, what isn't, what was invented. In *Shanghai Dancing* I was very confident, I was able to walk that line very confidently I think, and then *The Garden Book* developed from that as well.

**I have a question regarding the length of your novels, which has noticeably increased from *Shanghai Dancing* onwards. Did you aim for shorter novels before *Shanghai Dancing*, or did you decide to write a longer novel?**

No, I just felt that length had always been for me a short sprint and not a big epic. But then I thought “no, I need to do the marathon”, and I’m back now to the shorter book. Because *The Bath Fugues* is really quite short and much plainer.

**You mentioned that *Stepper* was based on the story of a spy, Richard Sorge, and that *The Garden Book* was based on the story of He Shuangqin. Can you elaborate on the starting point for each novel?**

*Stepper* was of course the conjunction of many things. I was writing a screenplay for *After China* with Jim Sharman. We actually got some interest from Gillian Armstrong to direct it but these things never work at the money stage. While we were writing this screenplay, Jim said to me: “Look, I lived in Japan when I put on the musical *Hair* in Tokyo”, and he said that during that performance one of his actors died: the actor committed suicide, after murdering his mother. So the whole thing collapsed. And he said that this very beautiful woman appeared behind the stage one day, she must have been in her eighties, she said “Look, Jim, if you want to make a musical or a play or something, I have a very interesting story to tell you. I was the lover of the most famous spy in the Second World War, his name was Richard Sorge”. Sorge was a spy for Russia, he was a German who spied for Stalin, was living in Japan and of course he was getting all the secrets about the Japanese before the war began. So he knew when Pearl Harbour was going to be attacked, it was all given to him in embassy circles. And he fell in love with a Japanese woman, and I thought that this was a pretty good story. So Jim and I went to Tokyo and tried to meet this woman. We arranged to meet in a café where Yukio Mishima used to drink his coffee, where they poured the coffee from a great height. At the last minute the waiter came – this was pre-mobile phone days – and said that there was a phone call. We went to the bar and picked up the phone and the woman said that she was very ill and in a very frail voice, said that she couldn’t meet us, Jim said that it was perfectly fine, and then he informed me that probably she was scared to meet a writer, who could tell a different story – she was right! So *Stepper* came out of this different story, totally imagined from this particular base.

*The Garden Book* was based on the story of He Shuangqing, the Chinese poet, and that was all I had. I had a book called *Leaves of Prayer* written by a Chinese woman from Hong Kong called Elsie Choy and I thought “yes, that’s a really great story to start with”. Setting it in the 1930s in Australia was the thing that really got me. It was in the Dandenongs, where I was living at the time, and I did some of the researching about the airplane crash which we still talk about these days on Mount Dandenong. The crash was the starting point too, and out of this immolation, this catastrophe, came this story.

**In *Double-Wolf*, it is clear that you were inspired by Freud’s patient, the Wolf-Man, and wrote about it in a very parodic way. Was there a figure or event that inspired you to write *Birds of Passage*?**

No, because it was my very first novel, *Birds of Passage* had hardly any research in it. I wrote about what I thought was missing, a gap in Australian literature. At the time, I don’t think anyone had written from a Chinese point of view at all. This was in 1979, or 1980 and I thought that I would just start from that particular basis, using the two voices. It started right from the beginning as a hybrid character and a hybrid voice, not just racially but in terms of the technique. Seamus is of course blue-eyed but looks Chinese and Shan is a Chinese person who came to Australia in the 1840s to look for

gold. So both are displaced, I suppose, and the split narrative makes it also a displacement. All of this was intended to revoke the linear notion of reading, with a stable time and place.

**Was there a general idea that guided *Pomeroy*?**

No, that was all over the place and it was about personal experience. As I said, it is more autobiographical than any of the other novels. I had good friends that I used to go sailing with. The falling off the yacht, that kind of thing, was a primal moment. It also happened in other novels like *Drift*, so falling out of a boat into the sea became a significant point.

**In *Drift*, you used the story of B. S. Johnson. I was wondering if the novel started with an interest in his life and suicide, or with a fascination with his novel *Trawl*.**

B. S. Johnson intrigued me because he said, and I can't quote him exactly, but he said that there is no such thing as fiction; that everything you write comes out of some kind of experience of your own, which you then elaborate. He's very strong on this point as an experimentalist in the 1960s. Even Beckett acknowledged him and said that this was an interesting move to completely confound or refuse the notion of fiction. Johnson's book *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* was a direct challenge. I also did some research on him and found that he may have come to Tasmania, he'd come to Melbourne for a film festival – this was just before his suicide – he made a film and it got shortlisted. I thought “oh that's pretty good to have him here in Australia”, and the whole story picked up from there.

**A long autobiography of B. S. Johnson was published after the publication of *Drift*, *Like a Fiery Elephant: the Story of B.S. Johnson* by Jonathan Coe.**

Yes.

**Have you read it out of curiosity?**

I haven't read it. I will read it one day. But again, I guess I don't need to know now. The imagination is always stronger than reality.

**I'd like to turn to *The Garden Book* now. The first title of the novel was much longer, and I was wondering if you could explain why you changed titles, and perhaps comment on the meaning of the final title. You said that it could refer to the Garden of Eden, but the title contains a myriad of meanings – what directed you to that title?**

The beginning came from a Nick Cave song, “You will find me if you want me in the garden”. It was inspired by an experience in an art gallery where a couple was quarrelling. The man went out into the courtyard and said “you will find me if you want me in the garden, unless it's pouring down with rain”. I thought that it was a beautiful line because there is a comeback: I'm not just leaving you, if it's pouring down with rain I may be back. I liked this idea because it worked with my characters – Swan wants to leave, but if something happens she will be back, as is the case when the war occurs,

she doesn't leave. I guess that title was just too long for my publisher because it wouldn't fit on the spine. The title refers to the whole idea of the Garden of Eden, the forests of the Dandenongs...

**A different type of Eden from the European model.**

***The Garden Book* is really your first novel to feature a woman as the main voice and main character. I was wondering if you could explain what motivated you to change your focus to write in a woman's voice.**

I think it takes a certain amount of experience and, maybe I'm just speaking for myself, novelistic maturity, because so many men fail to write women, so many women fail to write men. The only person that I can think of who actually gets women right, not young women, but old women, right, is Patrick White, and he was gay, so in a sense he had an *entrée* into that side of things. Maybe it's not a real woman but at least those feminine principles that he put in were far more sensitive and far more well-written. Swan steered away from taking on a woman's voice. It isn't really Swan's voice that I'm taking on either, there's a kind of shared narration, this woman being filtered through Norman Shih – that's how it got finally written. It's more his story than her voice. So she appears in flashes, she appears like colourful parrots through the trees every now and again and you don't quite get to focus on her as a significant monumental one-in-all voice but she's always seen or mirrored by others.

***The Garden Book* is your first novel to engage with Australian themes in a more conventional way – a novel featuring the bush. It also fully addresses the ethnic questions that you have hinted at in other novels, like *Birds of Passage* and *After China*, where you referred to the migrant experience and the dilemmas that migrants face, but these themes are addressed in direct terms in *The Garden Book*. Can you comment on this?**

I did some research and I was quite shocked to find out that between 1900 and 1922 – those dates may be wrong – there was actually an act passed since Federation that said that they were going to cleanse – using the word “cleanse” was really interesting – Australia of the Chinese by 1930. Now one of the ways that they did this methodical and systematic ethnic cleansing was to say that if you were not given a letter that said you were a naturalised Australian – or whatever the word they used – and you went overseas, you could not come back. You needed a re-entry permit, but to get this re-entry permit, it was not an automatic thing, you had to probably approach the minister or some big government official to get a letter – in those days everything was done by handwriting and letters – which said that you could come back into Australia. I was really shocked by this and I decided that this was maybe one of the conventional themes I could have dealt with, the White Australia policy, which was never written down by the way, it was never written down in those terms. I thought that I would get behind it and look at all the different things that affected individuals, such as the way they were treated by government officials. Swan was terribly treated, in the way I tried to write her anyway, by minor officials which was not just bureaucratic but racist. There were even references in Parliament that asked how much Chinese blood you had in you, how you looked and whether your eyes were slanted. I thought that this was grotesque and so I tried to depict some of those things.

Of course living in a country town in the Dandenongs at that time would have been pretty horrendous in terms of isolation, in terms of the way that there was no network of women or court systems, and you were at the mercy of not only the cruelty of the land, the landscape, but the cruelty of men and their society. One way to do this in the novel was to give a kind of equity to the idea of man and woman. I didn't want Darcy Damon to be totally without sympathy. Now one of the things I found was that if I started the book with him, I would be able to get some idea of the way that this guy struggled too against his lack of inheritance, lack of education, lack of everything else – he's pretty much an autodidact. That is admirable to a certain extent and he had to struggle very hard for his piece of land. So in order to gain this sympathy for him, I had to actually develop that character much more fully than, say, Swan. Now Swan comes in with a whole lot of cultural capital and educational privileges and, of course, the mismatch happens. Some readers said "how come your female characters are such victims and your male characters are all such diabolical heroes?" That's true, Damon is related to the word daemon, he's devilish. I felt that in order not to show that I'm just writing a propaganda or some element of victimisation, in trying to make a balance, I introduced a third subject. The ternary is the third, it is a very Freudian notion, a Lacanian notion. The third segment if you like, the third item in a series, always sets the balance back, so that you have two oppositional things and the third one always neutralises both. Jasper is actually the third of Norman's narrative. In one sense that projects a kind of difference, another pivot to the whole story, which pacifies that opposition between Swan and Darcy.

**I'd like to move on to a question on the ternary itself. *The Garden Book* has a ternary structure, whereas most of your other novels were very cyclical in terms of narration. In this sense, *The Garden Book* is much more linear. Was this a deliberate move out of cyclical patterns?**

I think that I just got caught up with the tale, and I just ran with it. In one sense it seems linear because it progresses through time in a chronologically linear way, but in another sense, because of Norman's inclusion, you have everything being archived by him. Now whether we believe him or not because he's an unreliable narrator, being a rare books librarian, is another question. He's archived all this and then connected it with himself, which is not cyclical so much as in the way Borges does in his stories. Lives seem to come out of libraries. Whole tales, whole linear fictions come out of books which repeat themselves. In one sense I suppose you could say that I enjoy playing with that and then I pull back to make the story immediate. Because this story was much stronger than the bibliographic desire to reference and embed others.

**In many of your novels, time is cyclical. In *Birds of Passage* for instance, the past and the present mingle, and this happens in *After China* and *Drift* as well, where there is no real distinction between different timeframes. I find that time is treated in a different way in *The Garden Book*; it is much more linear and seems to represent a change from your other novels – do you agree? Could you comment on your representation of time in this light?**

*After China* was where I played with time most of all. As you mentioned, I played with Foucault's notion of sex and time, the whole idea of cyclical movements and the telling of stories, ending time by telling stories like Scheherazade but in a kind of reverse way.

I'm not so sure whether *Drift* has that cyclical notion of time. In *Shanghai Dancing*, of course, it was all over the place, in terms of its jumping through different periods and lost worlds. I probably would say that my notion of time is very informed by the idea of memory. Memory doesn't work in a linear fashion. Memory works because each time you recall something, you're elaborating that recollection, so that memory is really a fictionalised element of time, of the usage of time. I felt that perhaps that was closer to how I felt rather than consciously writing cyclical stories.

In *The Garden Book* there is a cyclical movement as well, which are the seasons, the so-called seasons, which the rest of Australia really doesn't have. Because in the Dandenongs you do get quite specific seasons, it is governed by the motion of leaves dropping and flowers blooming. But no, I don't think I wrote consciously with that in mind, with that idea of time in mind. I've always played with the notion of time of course but I think it comes from the idea of memory, and how memory falls into timelessness. You know there are gaps, pockets of time, which I think house whole worlds, into which whole universes fall, because once you suspend the ordinary rule of time you can enter those places. Because you're not doing it historically. That's why a writer has much more of an *entrée*, a privilege into the creation of those worlds and to actually test and to taste the flavours of those worlds, which can't exist if you write objectively and research times and dates. I think the magical process can't happen with thought. In film, you have to have a flashback, a flash forward or maybe the voiceover. In a novel, it all happens through language. And language has flavours, so that whenever I hear French being spoken, it's a culture that I'm really tasting. Because I understand it. However if I didn't, it would have just sounded like Chinese or some African language. You can't enter that culture. You can translate it but you can't actually live it. So that again, it comes back to my original stance which was style – style and language. I'm very concerned about the usage of language and the loss of language in literature and language is being lost all the time.

### **What do you mean by the loss of language?**

When you read some modern novels, the vocabulary, the sentence structure, the syntax is diminishing, because it's trying to incorporate situation and dialogue into reality. It's losing its impact as language.

### **So it's the relationship to reality...**

That's right. You just met the poet Chris Wallace-Crabbe in the bar and you can sense his metaphors; within half a sentence, he comes up with the image of the rows of cowboys riding up and down the university, terrorising learning. So we're losing all those skills of figuration. And I think that just by copying reality you actually are limiting a lot of things, you're limiting whole worlds and that's what literature is all about, literature is about language.

### **Do you feel that as a novelist you try to work at keeping language alive?**

Yes, we're keeping grammars alive. Grammars of creation.

**You say that language “is being lost all the time”. In your novels, you often include games around language and you frequently refer to words and their translation in**

**other languages to expand their meaning. Is your idea of the loss of language related to your emphasis on translation?**

Yes, nuances. Because I grew up with Chinese, Portuguese, English and French. My father's first wife was French so he carried this whole cultural *mélange* to a huge degree. Most of the bookshelves were French books – Victor Hugo and so forth – he consciously made this colonial decision that English was going to be the *lingua franca*. It was good for me because that way I saw some of the other languages. I use these of course in some of my novels. In *Shanghai Dancing*, Portuguese and French words appear. It's flavouring I suppose. At the same time, it's seeing that there's a whole world out there, and that not everything is in English. We just make this assumption, well, Anglos make this assumption that the masterpieces of the world will automatically be translated into English. It doesn't hold true, because there are huge masterpieces out there that English speakers will not ever access because they can't speak that language.

**How important is it for your novels to be translated?**

Very important. Particularly reading it back to myself...

**Do you read your own novels in translation?**

Yes, because it shows the multivalences of translation for one thing. In *After China*, which in French became *L'Architecte Chinois*, I have a pun where I was talking about a young child misunderstanding "a king tide" – a king tide meaning a big wave, a big tide, a tidal change – as "the king died". In French I can't remember how it was translated, *La marée du Roi* as *La mort du Roi* I suppose, but *marée* is also a fish caught between tides and the main character is Mr You... *Yu* means "fish" in Chinese... and he is caught between tides towards the end of the book. So there are many things happening in translation which may not be apparent to readers, or perhaps even to the translator. Reading it back to myself I was translating myself.

**You have been translated into French, Chinese and German. Have you tried to access these translations?**

I can't read literary Chinese – my mother read *Birds of Passage* when it was translated into Chinese and she said it was very good. She was not a literary person, but she said it was done very plainly, and I felt good because it was my intention in *Birds of Passage* to be plain. That was good. I can't read much German but I tried to read *Pomeroy* in German.

**Has *Pomeroy* been translated into German? I thought only *Stepper* had been translated into German.**

*Pomeroy* has been translated into German, and that is easier to read than *Stepper* – it is the same translator but *Pomeroy* is just an easier story.

**Were you involved in the process of translation?**

No, not at all. No connection.

**Did the initiative come from individual translators?**

Yes, and publishing. A German publishing company contacted me, they had an in-house translator and they just said “we’d like to translate your book, here’s two thousand dollars”.

**Did you get any assistance from the ARC or institutions?**

No, not at all. The ARC doesn’t do translations or literature. More the Australia Council. The Australia Council subsidised all my translations, including the French one.

**I’d like to move on to a topic that you address in all of your novels – transgression. Your novels enact a variety of transgressions – sexual, racial, literary. What is the role and significance of transgression for you?**

Well, I guess that all writers transgress to a certain degree. Maybe not just issues but all kinds of literary transgressions, which I do all the time. I’m not sure I’m that conscious. Maybe when I was younger... Yes, when I was younger transgression was a big thing, I just wanted to get to the world a different point of view. That was done through literary techniques, through interest in certain issues, racial issues, cultural issues. More and more though, I think the notion of transgression is now an ordinary one. Everybody who calls themselves a postmodernist is transgressing to a certain degree, but are you transgressing any more? The canon has been well and truly demolished as it were. What are you actually transgressing? I think I’m becoming perhaps a bit more conservative in that view, thinking that transgression cannot offer much. Maybe what I’m doing is preserving... I appreciate transgressing language as Joyce did, but only because he was an archaeologist of etymology. He dug it up to bring it back.

**So again, about the loss of language?**

Yes, the loss of language. Preserving language. Which may look like transgression, I’m conscious of it, but it’s not necessarily an intentional or artificial process. Flaubert felt language was being commodified. He used italics to mock the use of cliché.

**What about the link between transgression and playfulness? I find that playfulness is really linked to the question of transgression – maybe not transgression in a conventional definition where one goes against the sacred, but moments when one goes against the mix. How do you understand your desire to play with language?**

This play with language again comes back to my interest in language, punning, parody. It’s referential, so what I do is reference upwards so there’s an intertextuality. It may look like transgression but it’s not, it’s simply saying that these other works and their experimentations are visible inside mine. I would reference – not directly – other writers, other works that have influenced me and anointed them as reference points. It’s a bookish world.

**I would like to turn to political issues. You address political issues and sensitive topics in many of your novels, for instance in *Drift*, where you address the situation**

**of Tasmanian Aborigines, and in *The Garden Book*, where you deal with the White Australia Policy. You address these issues, but they are at the same time “dismissed” in the novels. I was wondering if you could elaborate on this tension between politicisation and depoliticisation, and how political issues might be neutralised in a literary work.**

I think aesthetics is a great leveller. It tends to erase a lot of the sharp corners of polemic. In *Drift*, I felt that there was a level of political correctness that prevented people from writing from an Aboriginal point of view or using an Aboriginal voice. And I felt that this kind of political correctness can only limit or dampen the creative urge. It's like what you were saying a while back about writing as a man or a woman, it depends on what your confidence level is, and not many male writers want to write women because they feel that they cannot do it. There is a level of political correctness, you can't step over the limits, or become a kind of misogynistic writer coming into play. I've never actually let that make me afraid of taking on those boundaries, of jumping over those boundaries. So in *Drift* I actually went over them and wrote in several voices. Aesthetics always calls you back, so that you think you can override it by just taking an opposite point of view. But aesthetics will always bring back a certain kind of hidden morality if you like. I call this the morality of style. In order to write well, grammar and syntax will always bring you back to a kind of responsibility, the responsibility of style which is that it doesn't make the work hateful, just convincing. So I could never be a Demidenko, not just because of subject matter, because language itself and literature itself pulls you towards a certain ethical, not political, respectability. I don't mean in a false kind of way, I mean respect for rules – grammatical rules that keep you ethical... the narrative voice... the form ... the shape of the story which all direct empathy for suffering, for justice. Just representing the Real eliminates all that.

**You see a direct link between grammar and subject matter.**

Yes, subject matter. A rule which guides.

**So if you didn't write in good English...**

If I didn't write in good English and I just repeated what people said in the street, the kind of personal dialogue in the street, I would be another kind of writer, and those forces wouldn't come into play. In fact, there's no aesthetics in that as far as I am concerned. They might be shaped to a plot but there is no aesthetics when there is no grammar.

**By aesthetics you mean...**

I mean beauty, beauty of aestheticism, beauty of poetry, of shape, of the shape of a sentence. To me it's not about lyricism, it's about shape and it's about balance. You know when a long sentence has to be balanced, you are auto-adjusting the provocations, the transgressions and everything else. And that balance has a beautiful shape, and like any craftsman who is making a vase or a chair, you'd like to make that shape and that intention well. It hones sensitivity.

**I'd like to turn to the reception of *Drift*. Considering the sensitive topics that the novel addresses, I was wondering if there was a polemic around it, or if critics rather engaged with the literary aspects of the work.**

I think both. I didn't get so much criticism about the subject matter, maybe because it was in the same year that *The Hand that Signed the Paper* appeared. That won the prize, and, well, I was overshadowed by the political controversy. Somebody like Peter Craven pointed out that *Drift* should be up there in the running, mainly because I think he sensed that there was an aesthetics to it. The public had misread *The Hand that Signed the Paper* and nobody saw it as falsely sensational – they thought it polemically interesting, and therefore they thought it worthy of being elevated. It was easily mistaken for being a multicultural book, which the judges thought was the case.

**I find it fascinating that *Drift* didn't create much of a reaction compared to *Birds of Passage*, which was such a soft novel in comparison. It is interesting that certain novels should be at the centre of polemics and not others.**

**I was wondering if you could comment on the relation between your critical work and your novels.**

A good question. My critical work is obviously far more direct; I'm not playing with fiction like in a novel. Behind the essay I think is a voice that is closer to cognitive frankness if you like, so my essays are probably more polemical than my novels. Being a novelist from the beginning, I've always felt the difficulty of playing these two roles, but gradually I was able to say: well I'm not going to actually speak about my novels, as that would be too incestuous, but I can speak on issues, trends and ideas. So in many respects it's writing without a voice: it's trying to write without a voice. I don't know how the public receives that. I write more articles now than I do fictional works because being a traditionally pure novelist I don't do short stories – I have written a short story just last week but that was the first time I've delved into the short story for more than ten years. And I'm becoming more and more interested in essays mainly because my favourite authors are people like W. G. Sebald and John Coetzee, and these authors are not afraid to say that earlier forms of the essay honed writers of good novels.

**What is your motivation to write critical essays – what is your intended audience?**

I don't think of the audience. I think again of the essay in similar terms as an aesthetic form. An essay has to be very beautiful, and I would like to write beautiful essays, which inscribe both the elegance of thought and the provocations of language.

**Do you write essays out of a desire to express ideas?**

Yes, it's a desire to cast away the paraphernalia of fictional characters and the filter of voices. I'm really tired of the artificiality of building a character, building a setting, building a plot, building a voice, and then trying to seduce people into believing that and reading it.

But an essay gets straight to the point. It's a discipline to eliminate slippage. Here I am, I am critically engaging intellectually and cognitively with something rather than masking it, I'm trying for clarity. Maybe that's the key, maybe you've hit on something, maybe I haven't realised that before. *The Bath Fugues* is exactly that, it's a lot clearer

than any of my books, it doesn't merge into dream or fantasy or any of those kinds of long, cognitive sentences. It's a very clear, a very straight and a very short and lucid text. At least I hope so.

**Are you still interested in writing novels?**

In a very different form, yes.

**Something a little more straightforward?**

I'm moving towards something shorter, not straightforward so much. It can be very dense, intellectually, but far more cognitive. A good example is Coetzee, whom I admire a lot. In his later novels you see the same movement, his trajectory. Formerly his books were inventions, dream-like in certain senses, and had a plot. Then you look at *Diary of a Bad Year* and suddenly it's almost as if the plot itself is marginalia. In one sense, this turning away from the idea of fantasy is still a movement that I'm going through, I'm starting to despise fantasy. Maybe that's final, my power may be waning as a traditional novelist, but I don't think so. I think the novel is big enough to encompass all those different forms. This is really the third turn, the third stage of my experimentalism: it is this moving from lyricism and poetics to a lucidity because there is too much muddiness out there; too much illusion and virtuality.

**So what are your other two stages, and in which stage do you situate each novel?**

I began with imagination and fantasy. *Birds of Passage* was almost a phantasmatic, ghostings of history – so was *Double-Wolf* really. Even though that was based on one of Freud's patients, it's a fantasia – I think that's what Andrew Riemer called it, a fantasia. So are moments of childhood dreaming. In a sense you can't retread old ground, you have to move on.

**Turning to literary categories, you have been described as a modernist, high modernist and postmodernist. Do you see yourself as a modern or postmodern writer, or do you feel that these terms fail to describe you?**

I don't believe in a postmodernist literature. Literature has to be connected with "real presences" as George Steiner said. Postmodernism has dispensed with the real presence of emotion, with the connection between words and emotions. I believe that there is only modernism and high modernism – if you want to grade it like that. Modernism is where writing was revived experimentally, linguistically, innovatively, and it existed at least from the time of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. High modernism was at the sharper end of that ... highly conscious of its own process. I came out of a tradition where one admired people like Joyce and Beckett and it was hard to get away from that somehow – their work was a phenomenon. The best modernism was a dissipation of constructions like plot because it's simply saying "well that's all very good you don't need to be so constructive, so manipulative, so conformist". Postmodernism is first of all reading about writing, I don't think it's about writing which is in touch with experience.

**So more focused on the reader and reader analysis?**

Yes.

**What about the concept of play that has been put forward by postmodernism?**

It's tedious now though it wasn't before and I think that you can only do so much parody and making fun. That's because making fun is not serious. That's why I'm mainly pulling out of the fictional form. Maybe there's too much fun-making already, so I am now getting back to serious ideas and serious thoughts. Literature can be entertainment, but it has to be a lot more than that as well.

**Interesting. The name Estrellita is present in several of your works, in particular in *Pomeroy*, where she was a character, and in the title of your collection of essays, *Looking for Estrellita*. I was wondering what, or who, the name refers to, and what significance and symbolism it has – not personally – but in your work.**

Just a factual point was that the very first thing I ever wrote was a short story entitled "Estrellita". Now that came out of a song by the same name, a very beautiful song. It goes to show how influenced I am by music. Music runs through my work, and when I talk about aesthetic shapes maybe I'm actually talking about musical forms as well. It's the lyrics of the song that really enticed me, seduced me to write that short story and I found that the word Estrellita was really a Spanish word for a small star.

**I would like to ask a technical question about how your work is being published. How much has your work been edited by the various publishers that you have worked with throughout the years, in particular titles?**

It's up and down. There are some publishers who do a fair amount of critique of the work, and I believe that what is being done is that a lot of it is being outsourced to junior editors. I find that's where the fault lies if you like. And I've always battled that. If someone is interested in publishing your work, they should be looking at your work, not giving it to some junior in the office. That being said, I think one of the best editors I've had was somebody who didn't edit anything. That was Stephanie Dowrick at Allen and Unwin. All three books *Birds of Passage*, *After China* and *Double-Wolf* were edited by her. She was just very sharp and pointed out factual irregularities, and that's what an editor should do – she pointed out historical and factual problems, she knew her Freud. That's what you want from an editor, knowledge. But somebody who says "oh well you know I don't understand what this paragraph means"... I'm not so keen on re-writing for the sake of flatness. There's a certain density about my work that is important. Regarding titles, again, not many people have edited my titles but *The Garden Book* was shortened because it was too long for distributors, it didn't fit on the spine.

**I'd like to move to the theme of hybridity. Can you define what you mean by hybridity in your essays?**

I would take it from the very first point – literary hybridity. *Shanghai Dancing* is a perfect example, it's a hybrid literature: is it a narrative, is it an essay? Literary hybridity is where I'm coming from. I also represent cultural hybridity existentially. Coming from three or four different cultures gives me the length and breadth of delving

into them, being authorised to speak from those positions and feeling confident about that. I feel that is positive.

Now racial hybridity I actually question, maybe because science has now discovered the genetic code. We have one degree of separation from chimpanzees and there are some people who have less genetic relationship with others in the same village than, say, in Africa or on a different continent. Racial hybridity has been probably been overused or misused, and I really don't believe there is such a thing as race. There is skin colour but there isn't race. In that sense, hybridity comes directly out of cultural affiliations so that you don't have to look a certain way to belong to a certain culture. Sometimes I feel very French even though I would never be accepted as such. The critique of French integration is that you're French *but...* But in another sense I feel very affiliated; when I hear French being spoken I immediately feel that it is familiar, homely and part of home, because of my father. And the same with Asia. And I'm trying to become more and more in phase with Asia. I'm feeling more towards the view of not so much hybridity as towards cosmopolitanism. The whole idea of cosmopolitanism appeals to me.

**What conceptual difference do you see between hybridity and cosmopolitanism?**

Hybridity is an assertion of a fear, a fear of being half and half and, from the other side of the question, a fear of not being seen as a pure person, in racially purist terms. Again, hybridity threatens because people see themselves as pure, which is Gregory B. Lee's point. When they see a hybrid person, a *métis*, they are afraid that somehow they might be wiped out. Cosmopolitanism is more of an intellectual feeling rather than anything to do with appearance. So it's the analysis of being at home in the world, being at home in different places; which is not the same as globalisation, because globalisation is not so much about existence than about commerce. So I think that cosmopolitanism is more welcoming in a Derridean sense. We should all be cosmopolitans.

**In postcolonial studies, cosmopolitanism has been criticised as being the privilege of the elite – the privilege of the academic travelling the world. Do you find this problematic?**

Not at all, I think there's nothing wrong with elitism – but I mean elitism not in terms of monetary wealth but elitism in terms of cultural capital and education. There can be many travellers in the world, but travellers do not necessarily take on what they perceive, or understand what they are or where they are, they turn out to be uncritical tourists. So in a sense cosmopolitanism is not so much a privilege, it's the privileged ability to exist in different ways. To critique. If that's elitism that's fine. I think literature itself is elitist. It discriminates but it is appreciated by all classes.

**You have mentioned that *Shanghai Dancing* contains a form of literary hybridity. What do you include in literary hybridity and how do you define it?**

Not to be tied in to one particular form – for instance not writing a nineteenth-century novel, like Jane Austen. But the ability to move in and out of things. Small episodes, different forms, so that you're not tied to one particular voice even. I like to quote W.G. Sebald who said that in fiction, one rarely comes across real surprises, but in memoirs or in diaries or volumes of letters there are always unexpected things that you could

never have dreamt of. So the essay is as legitimately a novelistic form as the memoir or the epistolary mode.

**So at the level of form and voice. Do you find that there are other levels in the way you use it? You use hybridity to merge voices and not to be tied down by genre, but is there a literary hybridity at the level of words?**

If you look at Deleuze and Guattari's book *Mille Plateaux*, there is a section there on the way that English is being transformed and that there is a kind of cultural hybridity that has been inserted into, for instance, Jamaican English or Indian English. So English is being given totally new dimensions, and it is a positive development I think. That kind of hybridity, right at the level of the word, actually subverts presumed notions of the dominance of English, which I am also interested in.

**In "Eight Chinese Lessons", one of your essays, you analyse one of your father's letters, and suggest that it represented a form of mimicry and that it emphasised you father's deep understanding of power relations. Your analysis reminded me of Bhabha's work. I was wondering if you had read any theory on hybridity and if a theorist had influenced you.**

No, I haven't. Bhabha of course, but I've also given him away because of his prose. I don't find it appealing. I suppose Gregory B. Lee has written on hybridity in a clearer way which I like.

**Does your interest in, and formulation of, hybridity come from a personal experience or an intellectual reflection?**

It came from the negative. The word hybridity was once used when I was about fourteen years old. During holidays from boarding school I was always staying at friends' houses. I was working on one property near Tamworth and this woman, who owned the property next door, came visiting one day and said "Oh, go the hybrid". I thought, "Is that me?". Because she raised horses, hybrid horses – quarter horses were much stronger and resistant to diseases. When she said "Go the hybrid", I didn't know what this meant and I took it as an insult. Obviously she meant that hybrids are stronger.

But that's the way Australians have always regarded foreigners... as *breeds*, so I followed it through and I guess what I've been doing in my fiction since *Birds of Passage* is to try and contest that idea. It's only recently I think, later in one's career, that one becomes empowered by reading other people. Spivak was one of the people I read that actually empowered me because she wrote about translation and she wrote about this idea of moving across language into critiques of these simplistic notions of hybridity. By reading you are thinking and you are empowering yourself – maybe that's why I'm also interested in writing essays. As a novelist, you are on the other side of the curtain, you are in the darkness, you try to feel your way through. Sometimes you can write and other times you don't. A novelist is always powerless because you have to *be*. I mean existentially. You are investigating something from the inside out. You're not allowed to use the jargon of ideas. By using the jargon in theory you are actually already dismissing all that vulnerability as a writer. So yes, as a critic of course you use jargon as a form of power and contestation and critiquing others, but as a writer you

have to allow the personal experience to be mixed with some of your reading and at the same time to be vulnerable, to be open to attack.

**In your novels, you deal with mixed-race characters – many of your heroes are racially or culturally hybrid –, cross-cultural exchanges and hybrid genres. What is the significance of hybridity in literature for you?**

As a subject, nothing, I am not that interested in it. I find that it's more what works at the level of contradiction in the way that I have these dialogical positions if you like, dialectical moments and movements where I'm actually in contradiction with myself and other voices, contesting and opposing. For want of a better word, I'm stitching, like I take one position then I take the opposite position and put them against each other, not as if you'd come to any conclusion, but to spark off each other, to come and raise the rivalry and stakes in terms of a negative dialectic. Non-identity.

**So would you describe this as an exploration of complexity?**

Yes, I think so. I mean the Marxist notion of synthesis, thesis and the antithesis, the ternary, so I come from that side of things.

**Hybrid characters and cultural hybridity are generally represented in a positive way in your work. Your novels don't represent a happy hybridity or beautiful fusion, but the hybrid seems positive because it represents a variety and a complexity that are positive in your novels. Could you possibly explain the optimism of hybridity in your novels?**

I think complexity is a good word because unless one remains totally simplistic these terms will always be misread. I think hybridity is positive through its complexity. Fifty years ago this complexity used to be negative in public opinion. This kind of complexity used to be questioned and there was a lot of discomfort with the notion. Nowadays when I look around positively at the world, so many people are actually proud of claiming many different influences in their lives, not just "racially", but culturally. I think that the thing that *hasn't* been resolved in Australia is the indigenous question because that has always been such a negative in terms of hybridity. The "half-caste" used to be such a bad terminology; it's tainted whole generations. Even now, when I meet people who claim Aboriginality, they still feel a certain kind of shame with their pride. Shame because of the hybrid question. Pride because of identity empowerment. That positivity hasn't quite reached a high level mainly because Australia's refusing to face the past squarely; the whites did try to breed them out. What should be bred out now is the prejudice. Again, the perspective is very blocked by looking at things in terms of race. The word "race" should be erased.

**In France, the word race is a taboo, and is generally not used. Having grown up there, this is a natural stance for me, but I think that it doesn't challenge the central question of race – racial categorisation is still present even when the word has been erased from everyday language.**

Yes, it's an undertone. Officialdom cannot cleanse language. Nor should it. Literature, though, can raise awareness.

**I would like to move to the emergence of an Asian Australian community and the growth of Asian Australian studies. As a writer, you have mainly been addressed as a multicultural writer, with critics focusing on the experience of migration in your work, or as a purely literary author, where questions of migration are often ignored. I was wondering how you felt about these two approaches and the huge gap between them.**

I don't think there is a huge gap between them, you cross from one side to the other all the time. There is no such thing as any literature that is untouched by all these issues, and I've never believed that. I always feel that the word *multicultural* of course is fraught because of the way that it was officialised governmentally. Now to use that word is to immediately to fall on one side of the fence or the other. I also question the notion of Asia. When people say Asia, do they mean geographical positioning, do they mean racial positioning, what do they mean by Asia? Because in Asia there are so many different countries that don't perceive themselves as united. In that sense, Australia's perception of Asia as such – and Americans' perception – is based on a misnomer really. You have to speak very specifically of cultures: are you speaking of Chinese culture, are you speaking of Indonesian culture? Each one of them has their own ethnicities. When it comes down to the basic level, I prefer to use the word multi-ethnic if you want to talk about that kind of racial power.

Culturally there is a merging of specific cultures, which also happens within Australia. This is taking place at a local level, not at a national level. You can't officially create anything on a national level, but on ground level things are happening far more dynamically and vibrantly than ever before. So individual artists in groups and subgroups are interested in connecting with certain cultural affiliations. There's also a lot more travelling going on, which is a great thing, but this doesn't mean that you know the culture. The fusing of the Australian culture is a perception from above and the notion of reining in and controlling the national culture is a debatable one. When you look at Europe for instance, you have very specifically French national elements, very specifically German national elements and a history that goes with it. Again, you have to avoid being simplistic and to look at the history complexly, because there's a lot of dehistoricising going on. "We're all together, we're all the same" or "we're all different, but we all live in this melting pot". History is really important to look at – each individual history of each individual culture –, and I think that things work on this micro-level artistically and intellectually, not on an official level.

**One of the problems of multicultural literature is that it is rarely addressed in individual terms – novels are often addressed as being representative of a group. This really represents the Australian – and Western – attitude to the outside world.**

The point is that when you go to so-called Asia, Australia doesn't feature as multicultural. So "Australian" literature is automatically considered as white literature. Certainly in my novels the characters are "multicultural", though it would be simplistic for me to identify them as such. There should be enough nuancing for the reader to work this out.

Island societies are threatened by everything. Australia has no land borders and a huge land mass so it feels paranoid – it has always been fuelling opinions that "Asians" will

come down and swamp “us”. I think things are changing from that perspective. When people address China, they don't realise that there are so many ethnicities, so many regional areas. Many of those people are loyal to their clan, not to what the national rhetoric orders. The Chinese government is trying to say that, that you are Chinese and that you must come back to the homeland, the motherland, but that's another official line which doesn't necessarily hold true. Some Chinese novelists are addressing this multi-ethnicity in their novels. It doesn't mean China would be fragmented because of it.

**More of an ideology put forward.**

Yes.

**After the publication of *Birds of Passage*, you said that you were at the centre of a racial debate that you found a little overwhelming. I was wondering if your choices as a novelist have taken into account the way that you have been perceived by critics. Perhaps by this I mean that your move away from Asian Australian themes might have been due to the reception of *Birds of Passage*.**

Yes, I found what goes on at the level of the press tedious after a while. 1984 was a year in which everything became very sterile and hysterical. I think that those are waves that keep reappearing every now and again. It's cyclical to a certain degree, but it's less and less now. One of the good things about globalisation is that even the latest fiscal crisis has shown that we're all connected, that you can't set yourself apart, and in lots of respects I've lost interest in those kinds of issues. The Howard era was particularly distasteful in terms of the way his government treated asylum-seekers. To give everyone their due in terms of this treatment, most countries are doing that. But it goes to show that maybe there needs to be a rethinking of the fact that people are not lying, that they do have their lives in jeopardy and therefore that there must be a way to have protection provided. New laws must be made at an international level, not simply at a local level. So yes, I think maybe I was written out that year. A novelist cannot deal with issues alone.

**Do you feel that you react to the way that you are being categorised; do you feel that it influences your choices as a novelist in a way?**

Reviewers do it all the time, the naming, the pigeonholing, the classification. It's one way of speaking and it makes it easy for them to do that because it's much easier. That means at the level of the actual book that they haven't read it: it's a form of laziness. There is a huge difference between a review and a critical article or academic paper.

**Again, at the time of the immigration debate, it was quite clear that you were trying not to be classified as Asian Australian. I was wondering if you still tried to avoid that label and how you situate yourself in regards to the emerging field of Asian Australian studies.**

Those are two different questions. I don't see myself as so-called Asian Australian, I think I'm cosmopolitan. My education, my experiences have been Australian. I'm a small “a” Australian. It's an emerging viewpoint that is still new in officialese.

Regarding the other question about Asian Australian studies, these are categories, for want of a better term I think they should change it, it's the wrong term or terminology to use because it's an academic classification which tries to bottle up creativity. Sooner or later writers will be trying to write within and for this category. I think the racial label will fade away in the future. It's like calling certain writers "negro" writers. That went out in the USA a long time ago. "Black" is now the appellation. But why? Do we use the label "white" writer in England when we refer to Martin Amis or Ian McEwan?

**And it is based on ethnicity, which is rather problematic...**

Exactly. There are Japanese studies, Indonesian studies. Asian Australian studies lumps everything into one. I think the category comes out of the product of cultural studies which, in my own opinion, has straight-jacketed literature by refusing its subjectivity and authority. Literature has become a dirty word. As if everybody spoke theoretically. This approach doesn't work at the level of action. They are only speech-acts, not real acts. They narrow down a field while erasing the individual subject. And this idea of geographical classification comes straight out of that. There are no more authors, only fields.

**I was wondering if you could perhaps tell me about your latest novel: what themes does it address?**

It's called *The Bath Fugues* and, coming back to that idea of the musical form, it is based on the idea of the fugue in music, which is contrapuntal. If you listen to a Bach fugue, you have this contradictory and dialectical kind of music. At the bottom, however, is what they call a ground base. There is a thematic that is constant, that doesn't get dialectical. So in a sense there is a basis, a base to the whole piece. Again, the book has three parts, it's ternary, and it's connecting the idea of the musical fugue with the idea of the psychological fugue. Between 1860 and 1890 in France and in Germany, many men simply left home and gave themselves another name, became other people and ended in villages miles away or in a different country, living under assumed names and actually believing that they were somebody else. They were discovered decades later and doctors called this the fugal state. Now historically there were two reasons for it. One was that military service had become almost universal and they were trying to avoid that psychologically. Secondly, public transport became accessible, so trains, buses became more numerous and the bicycle encapsulated the idea of freedom. You could jump on a bicycle, ride a hundred miles, become someone else, and not be found out, because at that time communications were not that good. Particularly in France because even up until 1894 apparently, regions in France were unique and unknown to each other. Some were in the wilderness; you might know someone from the next village but probably not from the one after. I got very interested in this. So *The Bath Fugues* is about characters who actually get into the bath, have a bath, and psychologically start wandering. Of course there is a plot which I won't tell, but I deal with the notion of the bicycle as the vehicle of the imagination. Right throughout this book it's about the bicycle as a liberating machine, as a triangle inducing triangular stories, as a form of emotional transport, but it's a transport that is self-propelled as part of one's skeleton, so the skeleton forms part of the bicycle frame and this skeleton is the framework, the cognitive movement and direction of my writing

career. It's a tri-partite trajectory. I'm now in the third phase, dealing with age and forgetting.

**Are you interested in the numerous bicycles in China?**

Yes, some of that is in there, but it's three points of view, three different things and then they're interlinked in the plot, so it's ternary again. I have a Chinese bicycle. It's called a "Forever" bicycle. Now, I think that says it all.

**Does the concept of polyphony or "polyphonia", which you introduced in "Eight Chinese Lessons", enter the novel?**

No, it doesn't actually. This book is very plain. It doesn't have those kinds of degrees of verbal complexity although you have to read between the lines to find its meaning.

**I have a question on "polyphonia": how do you relate it to, or distance it from, the idea of hybridity?**

That goes back to a connection between a book I read by Deleuze and Guattari and the little book by Elias Canetti called *Kafka's Other Trial*, a brilliant piece. It was there that Canetti spoke about Kafka's postcard to his fiancée Félice, in which Kafka writes that he was "indeed [...] a Chinese". It was a ritualism, an asceticism which imbued him with a sense of smallness thus enabling him to subvert ideas from within. Deleuze and Guattari take this up, calling it a "minor" literature... the writing of a major language which subverts it from within, allowing that language to take flight. Minor not by being in a lesser degree, but minor because it's in the minor key. Like a musical fugue, it subverts the theme by not being only contrapuntal but by using an emotional key change... that of sadness and loss.

So I find that polyphonia, to use that term, is not a confluence of different voices but voices in a dialectically sad key. Voices that have actually found they've lost a kind of mainstream positioning, but they're not passive either, they're just not being heard until the reader is inundated with them. Kafka was held up as exemplary of this because he wrote in German, he lived in Prague and he was a Jew. All of those things disempowered him completely. So he used "language machines" as a political tool. I found that this was what I was interested in, polyphonia, coming at writing from different voices, different positions and yet telling the sad story of its own loss. That's probably what intrigued me. That a kind of loss and failure was also a subversion and an empowering. I don't think hybridity does this because it is not a language but a stated condition. Hybridity does not express. It is a classification and as a term is continually classified within its passivity. It is not a term of power.

**In academic theory, there is often a conflation of the novelist and the theorist, and novels are frequently regarded as direct theorisations of life, society and the world. I was wondering how you understood the relationship between the novelist and the theorist, their differences and common points...**

Well I read theory for the sake of its creativeness and that's because I read good theorists, there are so many bad ones. I don't actually like the word theorist, I like the word thinkers. You might have called Foucault, Roland Barthes or Derrida theorists but

I don't, I read them because of their beauty of thought and language. That's what I'm discovering. They're not writing a fiction, they're not writing lyricism, they're not writing poetry but when you read Barthes there's a certain poetry of ideas. The thought is a really a commanding notion because he's so confident in what he says. It sounds like he's playing down the theory but the conceptualisation is so good, so clear, so startling and astonishing that it's inventive, and its inventiveness has powerfully colonised the field of thought. That's what I like and admire about good thinkers like that. The same with Foucault. Derrida, yes, but he tends to repeat himself a lot and turns a sentence around etymologically, which is what I do in fiction, but I don't point it out. It's tedious pointing out everything I've turned around and analysed from the Greek, and it would be very hard. So I read people that leave off doing that. At the moment I'm reading Alain Badiou, but again I find there's a loss there of language, even if I read in French. I think the brilliance of that generation, who are all dead now – Althusser, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault – the brilliance of that generation was a phenomenon, and there are a whole lot of copiers and not too many that perhaps struck me that I would like and enjoy. I'm reading less and less theory. I'm reading back now into great writers like Levi-Strauss, Fernand Braudel and Norbert Elias, who discuss such interesting things as the strange behaviours of certain societies, medieval societies and their idea of time, the idea of seasons. This is far more interesting to me now than the latest jargon.

**Where do you think the contribution of the thinker differs from the contribution of the novelist?**

I don't think the novelist is a thinker as defined by the academy. A novelist does not present ideas for discussion. I think the novelist is not an intellectual so much as a person propelled by an emotional intelligence. Flaubert, for example, was supposedly a mediocre intelligence, but as Sartre said, he was a genius solely through creating a perfect work of art: *Madame Bovary*. A novelist is an investigator of language and nuances. A snake-charmer. A purveyor of discontent. But the novelist is way ahead of the crowd. The novelist can sense society's blind journey into the future.

**So very language-based rather than content-based...**

Yes, very language-based. To me it's facile to just have a great plot. But as a novelist if you write almost a perfect sentence in order to detail a certain emotion that could never be expressed except by means of this particular sentence then you've done something remarkable. And it's not necessarily because you were teaching at the *École Normale* or anything like that. It occurs out of a visceral thing almost, because you read and you think and you experience the world, and sometimes people forget that experiencing the world is what novelists do. Writers do not necessarily have more experience than everybody else, but they experience the world in all its small moments and they capture those moments. It's not necessarily indistinguishable between the two, writer and thinker. Some people bring it together and some people don't. Roland Barthes I would not say was just a theorist, he was a great writer. So I feel as though I'm moving towards them, they're moving towards me. Maybe when I talk about Coetzee I'm seeing that now, that notion of wrestling with ideas, but not necessarily at a theoretical level, just questioning those minor moments and writing them into a minor narrative when the major drama takes place in the margins. Maybe I might go back to that kind of big

expansive *Drift* kind of writing again, I'm not sure. I'm reading more essays than ever before, I hardly read fiction.

**I would like ask you one last question. I was wondering if you had any other works in progress and what themes you were working on at the moment – do you have a next novel in mind?**

No, in this job that I do now it's very hard to have the time. I'd like to return to writing poetry. Because of my involvement and my interest in language, I really like the idea of writing poems, maybe going towards a collection, and in terms of the other side the essay. Possibly somewhere in between!

**You did write all the poems in *The Garden Book*...**

Yes, and some people told me they were good poems, I don't know.

**When I read your novels I feel like I'm reading prose poems...**

Maybe I should just squash up future novels, write compressed prose poems of great intensity!

**This question is a little more personal, but what is it you are hoping to bring to creative writing as a novelist?**

Giving something back. Because I don't think you can teach talent, you can find talent and develop it. Fortunately I've actually found a couple of good writers as my students. There is nothing better to know that here's a young person out on their first novel and they're going to be a good writer. You give them all the comments necessary, all your experience necessary, and they go out there into the world and fly. That's very satisfying, but I'm also doing this job to change some of the perceptions, not so much about creative writing but about literature, that I think have been lost. When I look at some of my best students, in terms of creative writing, they actually have very strong, developed ideas of literature, not in a formalistic or traditional way but they use language complexly and then you find that they also have ideas. They also think. That's when it all comes together. This is what I would like to present to those who are sceptical about creative writing programs: the best is available in praxis, not just in theory.

**Great. Thank you very much!**

You're welcome. It was a pleasure.

**Marilyne Brun** has just completed a PhD in Australian studies at Université Toulouse-Le Mirail, and the University of Melbourne. Her thesis focused on Brian Castro's novels, with particular emphasis on Castro's use of hybridity. Her research interests include the discursive construction of racism, diasporic literatures, hybridity and literary games. She has published articles on Brian Castro's work and hybridity theory.

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